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ABSTRACT

Cluster evaluations have been defined as involving multiple sites, focusing on longer term projects, involving substantially different approaches to similar problems, and improving the social condition. Cluster evaluation is illustrated through the description of an initiative funded by the W. K. Kellogg Foundation called the Leadership for Institutional Change (LINC) program. LINC seeks to provide support and guidance for new leadership models in higher education among land grant universities. Cluster evaluators were identified rather early in the LINC process, but only after the extensive needs analysis had been conducted. The cluster evaluator did have some input into the process of initiative design. Experiences from the LINC initiative and other cluster evaluations have resulted in a proposed cluster evaluation framework, which contains the following elements: (1) evaluate the planning context and client system; (2) assess the needs assessment; (3) evaluate and refine the program objectives; and (4) assess the proposed objectives and action plans. (SLD)

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Cluster Evaluation as Program Development

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Introduction

What is the role of cluster evaluation in the life-cycle of a program or a project? The answer is, it "depends" This question looms larger than normal when a project is billed as a "learning" opportunity or an organizational change project. This paper is a way to help me get a bearing on just where I am in the evaluation/program development landscape. Some may likely think that cluster evaluation is over the horizon or at least not in the neighborhood of good, solid, trusted, and time tested traditional evaluation projects. Perhaps they are correct, however, when viewed as evaluation of developmental undertakings, cluster evaluation may be messy, but it is vital to the growth and development of initiatives.

Cluster evaluation has been defined elsewhere (Schmitz, 1997; Worthen and Schmitz, 1997), but a brief review may help us gain some common ground. Cluster evaluations have been defined by the following characteristics: 1. Involving multiple sites, 2. Focusing on longer term projects, 3. Involving substantially different approaches to similar if not the same problems, and 4. Improving, on a rather large scale, the social condition.

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Background

Given this rather wide definition of cluster evaluation let me set the stage for a particular cluster evaluation. The W.K. Kellogg Foundation a number of years ago funded an initiative titled Food Systems Profession Education which was aimed at helping colleges of agriculture in the U.S. to think about their futures and to undertake necessary changes needed. As that initiative developed a number of things emerged. Among them was the need for a new look at leadership among the nation's land-grant universities. Hence the birth of another initiative "Leadership for Institutional Change" (LINC). As described on its web page, LINC is...

> A national leadership development dialogue established by the W.K. Kellogg Foundation among twelve state and land-grant university consortiums throughout the United States. Each of these twelve consortiums are also involved in the W.K. Kellogg Food Systems Professions Education (FSPE) Initiative. The FSPE initiative seeks to catalyze change in state and land-grant universities throughout the united States. In order for that change to be successful, new models for leadership within land-grant universities are required. This Leadership for Institutional Change (LINC) Initiative seeks to provide guidance and support for new leadership models in higher education.
>
> (http://www.kellogglinc.com/about.html)

While the description does little for someone looking for evaluation guidance, its stated outcomes offer some direction. These are listed as:

1. Enhance the capacity of the W.K. Kellogg Foundation to support systemic change.

2. Support the development of values-based, enabling leadership that is both a cause and a result of transformational change.

3. Facilitate change in higher education that better connects colleges and universities to the needs of learners and communities.

A little more help can be found in additional hoped for outcomes:

1. Collective leadership models that focus on faculty and their external partners working in collaboration for the good of the institution and stakeholder groups.

2. Development of a critical mass of faculty and partners with shared leadership skills built on shared visions and values.

3. Catalyzing successful long-term sustainable models that are responsive to those institutional changes advocated by the resident FSPE project.

4. Sustainable models of leadership development that allow universities to continue to build a supply of sophisticated, well-trained leaders for the future.

With these stated outcomes, most evaluators would be happy as clams and move ahead with plans to measure the above listed outcomes. But even with these outcomes there can be a fog and questions about what a funder "really" wants. These kinds of questions, which stem from the nature of the initiative and which have to do with organizational change and all that it implies, include: changing organizational culture, building a new set of skills among faculty and administrators, and changing traditions. When one begins a project with outcomes like enhance, development, facilitate, and catalyzing, I assure you that things can and do get cloudy in a hurry.

Whose fault is such a situation? How does one deal with fog? What steps can be taken to make more certain that such problems do not occur in the future? I would submit that these are the wrong questions.

The questions we ought to be asking, especially in a cluster evaluation that deals with changing organizations, should deal with learning and sharing. "What did we learn from this project and project activities? and "how can we best share that with the appropriate audience?"

To help answer those kinds of questions it might be best to look at cluster evaluation that deals with organizational or institutional change in the context of program planning or program development. Such a look will provide some "hooks" or points of contact for cluster evaluators.

Program Development

A quick review of the program development literature will help further contextualize cluster evaluation in program development terms. Most of the references in this section come from discipline of adult education. Program development is contrasted with instructional design. As a result, the concepts discussed are on a much wider breadth than instructional development terms would provide. For example, needs analysis in program development seldom refers to skill development, rather it reflects audiences analysis, program content, delivery formats and the like.

Sork and Caffarella (1989) offer an interesting and relevant comment on program planning. "In its most general sense, planning refers to the process of determining the ends to be pursued and the means employed to achieve them" (p. 233). This is descriptive of the initiative that I'm currently involved in as a cluster evaluator. The parts of the planning model described

by Sork and Caffarella (1989) include: (1) analyze planning context and client system, (2) assess needs, (3) develop program objectives, (4) formulate instructional plan, (5) formulate administrative plan, and (6) design a program evaluation plan (Sork and Caffarella). Other functional concerns include participation, staffing, resources, coordination, and external relations (Knox, 1991). Using this framework of program development, I would like to briefly describe cluster evaluation functions with each category of program planning.

Analyzing the planning context and client systems

Sork and Caffarella have outlined some important considerations that could very well help cluster evaluators and project or initiative personnel. Areas of concern listed include: (1) the history and traditions of the organization, (2) the current structures that govern the flow of communication and authority, (3) the mission of the organization, (4) the resource limits, (5) the standard operating procedures, and (6) any philosophical constraints that limit who can be served or what types of needs can be addressed. These factors are internal to the particular organization that is doing either the project or initiative planning. They are important considerations as initiatives are being thought about. These elements might well be used as preliminary screens in selecting potential grantees. They might make more sense for selection purposes than would a tightly planned and proposed project that lists outcomes which may or may not be appropriate or even possible in the very preliminary stages of planning. At very least they are important areas for study by cluster evaluators especially when initiatives aim at the heart of institutional ways of doing business. These elements can help at two levels: as a pre-screen for funders; and as a guide

for cluster evaluators as projects proceed.

Needs analysis

At an initiative level the Foundation does an exceptional job of needs analysis. Often months and even years of fact finding, discussions with various clients and stakeholders, and formal and informal program offerings inform the Foundation of problematic areas which leads it into initiative areas. Cluster evaluation may be considered at this point, but often the cluster evaluators are not in place until after the needs analysis has taken place. In the particular case of LINC, the cluster evaluators were identified rather early but after the extensive needs analysis. The cluster evaluator had some initial input into the process of the initiative design.

There is another level of needs analysis that is perhaps less focused upon at the initiative level. The individual project level is more specific in terms of outcomes and objectives. When a funder offers dollars for participation in an initiative, potential projects propose activities and outcomes that are intended to fit within initiative's broad goals. Using the characteristics listed in the "Contextualizing" section above, the potential of mismatch between projects' and initiative goals may be reduced. After the fact (after a project is funded within an initiative area), this is one area where a cluster evaluator might look retrospectively and ask about the initiative's need definition and the project's need definition to determine the relationship. This activity could help reduce the comments that are often heard that go something like "what does the Foundation really want?" or "what is the real agenda here?" Such comments have been encountered in the last two cluster evaluations with which I have been involved. This is likely a function of just how developmental the initiatives really are.

Program objective setting

This is the life line of evaluators. There has been much debate about the value of an objective *vis a vis* evaluation and it usually comes up as being very important. I need objectives, goals, outcomes to do my work as an evaluator. Sork and Caffarella define program objectives as "statements of the anticipated results of the program" (p.238). They divide objectives into two broad categories: educational objectives which deal with participant learning and organizational or operational objectives related to educational for organizational function. Objectives are rooted in the needs analysis and provide benchmarks or comparisons for cluster evaluations.

But there is debate about objectives in terms of program planning. Reliance upon set objective often limits what the cluster evaluator can and should look for. Unanticipated outcomes or objectives that evolve or change or that are added can and will be missed. In fact, in a development initiative perhaps the critical function of objects are to merely "point the way" or give direction and not provide the foundation of careful measurement.

Terms like enhance, support and facilitate are rather difficult for an evaluator to get his or her hands around. Measurement becomes problematic and hence providing evidence may be difficult. I would submit that the kinds of goals mentioned earlier are an indication of a developmental approach to a problem. It suggests a lack of definition at the beginning of an initiative. The goals may actually tell us more about the program if we ask an important question: "Why are the goals so global at this point?" Global goals can provide expectations for cluster evaluators. The contribution from a cluster evaluator might not be tight measurement, but rather

refinement for an initiative and its projects. Such refinement comes as the cluster evaluator, funder, grantee, and others interact to better define initiative outcomes.

Learning activities

The program development model presented by Knox (1991) and Sork and Caffarella (1989) is fixed in a learning paradigm and thus does not necessarily view program development as having other outcomes beyond learning. In today's setting much has been written about learning organizations. For example, in *Sculpting the Learning Organization* by Karen E. Watkins and Victoria J. Marsick, the authors provide a whole new arena for program development activities that are more organizationally bounded and influenced than a strict learning experiences would be. And it is into this arena that the Foundation has lead this cluster evaluator.

If learning is considered in an organizational frame, then additional dimensions of measurement open to an evaluator. Organizational capacity becomes a more refined concept and new ways to document change and progress become possible. For example, organizational openness, communication, cross functional teaming and more can all be closely looked at.

Looking for additional documentation approaches is in keeping with the sage words of the sage words of Connie Schmitz (1997) which become not only descriptive, but also salutary.

> Not every program cluster (or its evaluation) is expected to conform...in terms of scope, structure, or strategy. Each time the Kellogg Foundation launches an initiative, it must wrestle with a number of issues that are unique to the nature of the problem begin addressed, the participants involved, and the initiative's

> specific mission and goals. Perhaps the single most important principal embedded in it is that a successful cluster evaluation depends upon a team approach....(Schmitz, 1997).

What is described here is an attempt by cluster evaluators to keep up with a changing evaluation context. It is not uncommon for a cluster evaluator to ask program staff "what new questions do you have based on what you have heard and what information we have assembled at this point in time?" To hold to concrete, specific, and unchanging objectives would not only provide old, stale and potentially useless information, it would also fail to describe what the reality of a changing initiative might be. If we subscribe to the notion of useful evaluations then, in a cluster evaluation situation we may have to worry less about contextual terms and more about useful information.

Program Evaluation

This arena is duck soup for an evaluator, or is it? Evaluators can move quickly to several models and choose, or they can pull from existing models to build one expressly for the evaluation situation. But this is just precisely where the rub comes. The selection of the model, or parts thereof can lead to evaluation paralysis. We can become so worried about doing it properly, that we easily forget to do anything. Cluster evaluation, at least in the context which I have described (which is one of evolving and developing initiatives), has to be fast, timely (which is different from fast), accurate, instant, and helpful.

Connie Schmitz and Blaine Worthen have suggested that some degree of structure be superimposed upon the sometimes chaotic environment of cluster evaluations. On the surface, this

recommendation has much merit, however, when looks more closely at the cluster evaluation environment, this may not be possible. In fact if the cluster evaluator is doing his or her job, then he or she may actually add to the apparent chaos. Patton (1978) used a very descriptive term as he wrote about evaluation and utilization. That term, the "active-reactive adaptive evaluator," (p.284) in a nut shell describes the role of the cluster evaluator in the early developmental stages of an initiative. It is extremely important for a cluster evaluator not to get hardening of the methodologies. Just as critical, the cluster evaluator needs to understand that his or her role will change over the course of the initiative. Early on it is being a scout, an early warning system, a canary in a cage in a mine. But the role may change into one of measurement, of proving, and of testing. Flexibility is an important characteristic for cluster evaluators.

A Proposed Cluster Evaluation Frame

Cluster evaluation as program planning may well provide the structure that Schmitz and Worthen call for and that I earlier noted may be difficult to obtain. Cluster evaluation may have to go through the outlined program development steps if it is to be useful to the people involved. These program development areas are next listed with potential questions that a cluster evaluator may want to ask.

Evaluate the planning context and client system

What evidence is there that the history and traditions of an organization match the overall goals of an initiative? Who are the decision makers and influencers in the organization? How well does the mission (or past mission) relate to the initiative? Who is the organization's audiences?

Assess the needs assessment

To what degree has the needs analysis been conducted? Who did the needs analysis? What were the sources of information? How broadly have the results been accepted?

Evaluate and refine the program objectives

How firm are the project's objectives? Who was involved in establishing the objectives? How widely accepted are the objectives? How likely is it that the objectives will change? And how quickly will they change? Which kinds of objectives are prevalent (educational objectives or organizational/operational objectives)? What organic benchmarks are available for use? Do the objectives need further refinement? Who will do this?

Assess the proposed objectives and action plan(s)

Who owns the vision? What is the organizational purpose? How well does this initiative fit the organizational purpose? Is there resistance to the project/initiative? Where is it coming from? To what extent did team members define and develop objectives and action plans.

Comment upon the proposed project evaluation plans

How fixed or firm are the evaluation activities? Are there multiple evaluation models being proposed for the evaluation plan?

Answers to these questions will not only help steer the cluster evaluator, but will also supply important information for cluster evaluation reports. This framework or one similar to it may well help cluster evaluators navigate unfamiliar territory, or territory that is changed by upheaval in the institutional tectonic plates.

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